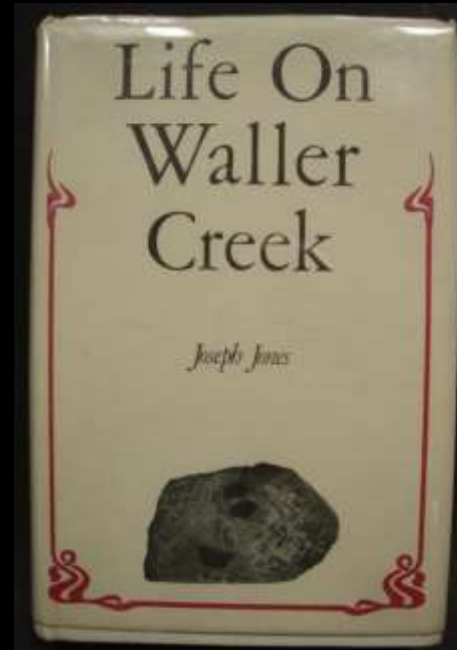
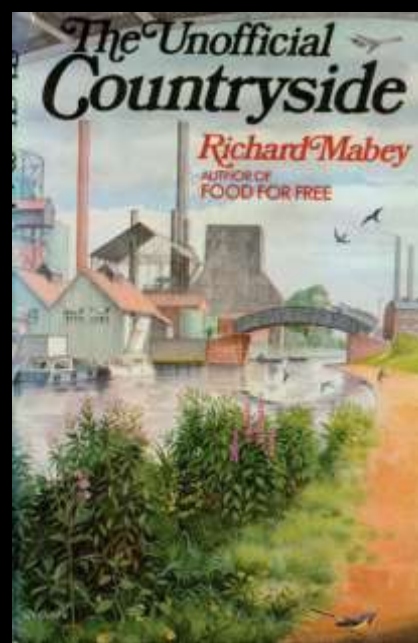
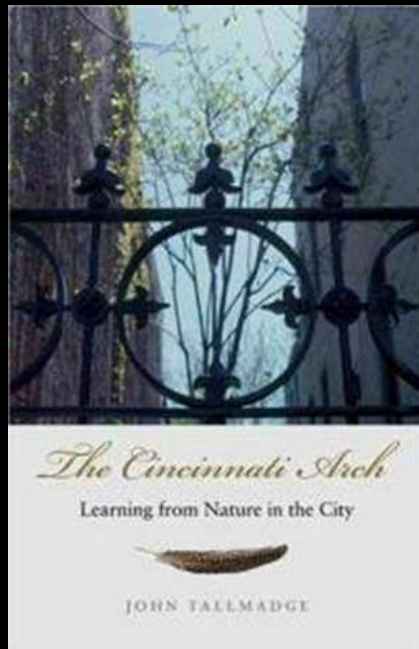
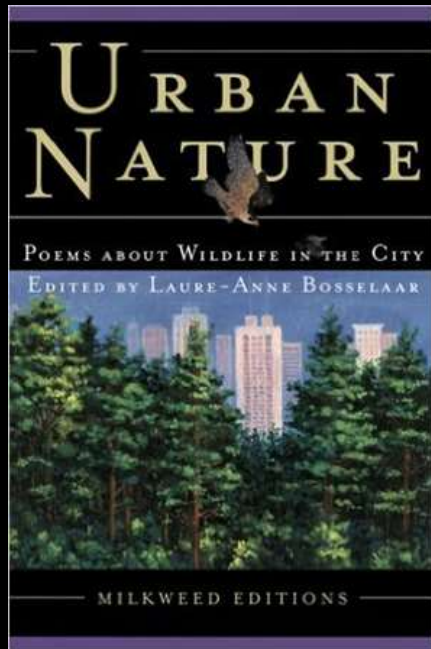




Encounters with Urban Nature: Ecology, the City, and the Arts



Kevin M. Anderson, Ph.D.
Austin Water – Center for Environmental Research

The Proper Place of Nature

We need to embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral, and the wild each has its proper place, which we permit ourselves to celebrate without needlessly denigrating the others.

William Cronon “The Trouble with Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”
in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1995)



The American Concept(s) of Nature

In the United States, the kinds of nature that we celebrate are wilderness and pastoral landscapes.

They are the foundation of the American concept of nature from which we assess the value of nature in America.



The Problem of Urban Nature

- In American cities, we perceive nature in the urban landscape filtered through a conceptual framework that prejudices its ecological and cultural value.
- Our understanding of what constitutes good urban nature in American cities is shaped by culturally dominant metaphors of nature.

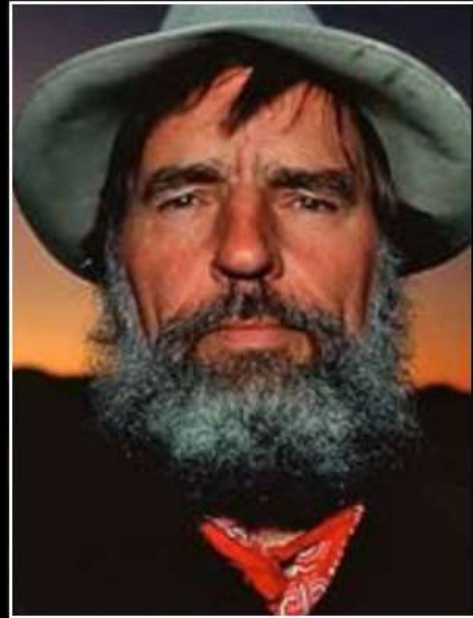
Wilderness

Pastoral

Urban Nature?



American Nature Writing – Wilderness and Wildness

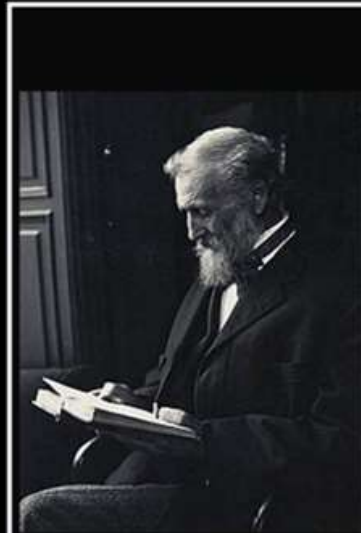


Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread. A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself.

— *Edward Abbey* —

AZ QUOTES

**“In wilderness
is the preservation
of the world.”
Thoreau**



In God's wildness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness. The galling harness of civilization drops off, and wounds heal ere we are aware.

(John Muir)

izquotes.com

Thoreau and the City - Wildness

Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1862)

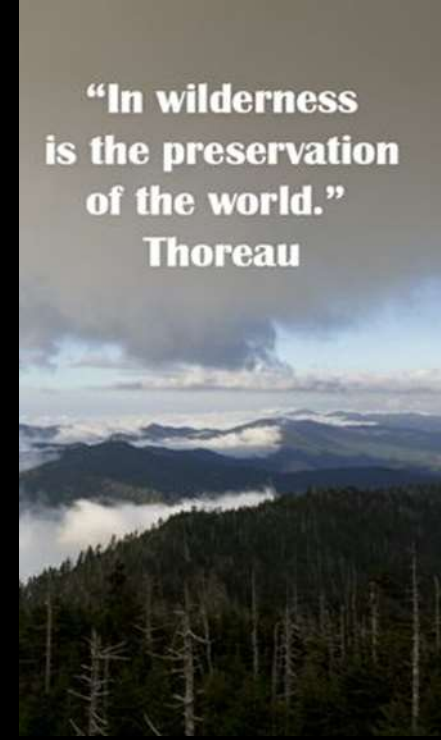
The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world.

Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind.

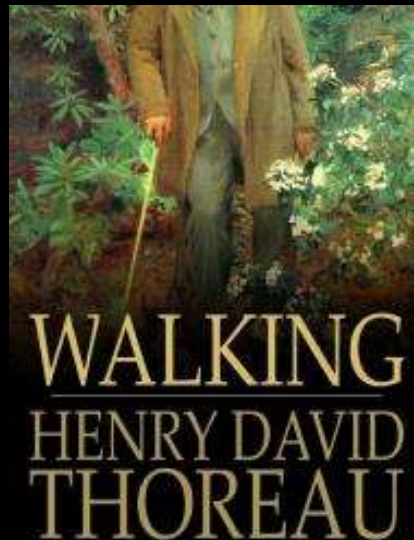
Life consists with Wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him.

Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps.

**"In wilderness
is the preservation
of the world."
Thoreau**



1817-1862



Imported at Any Price - The Proper Places for Urban Nature Redeeming the City with Nature

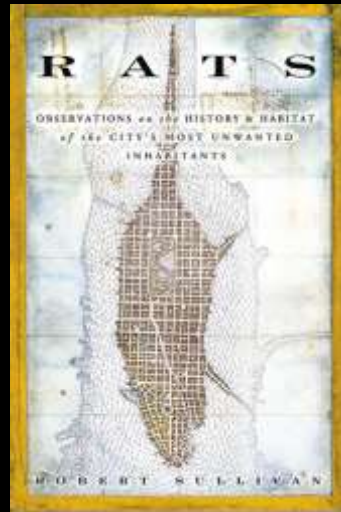
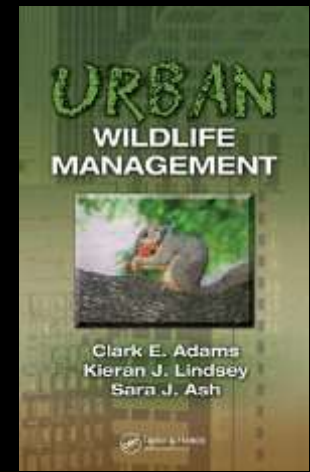
Greenspace, Parks, Gardens, Farms, Preserves, Wildlands

In America, we celebrate urban nature that is either deliberately cultivated pastoral “greenspace” like parks, gardens, and urban farms or formally protected as remnants of the “wild” native landscapes obliterated by the creation of the city in preserves, sanctuaries, refuges, and other “wildlands”.



Urban Wildness - The Challenge of Urban Wildlife Out of Place

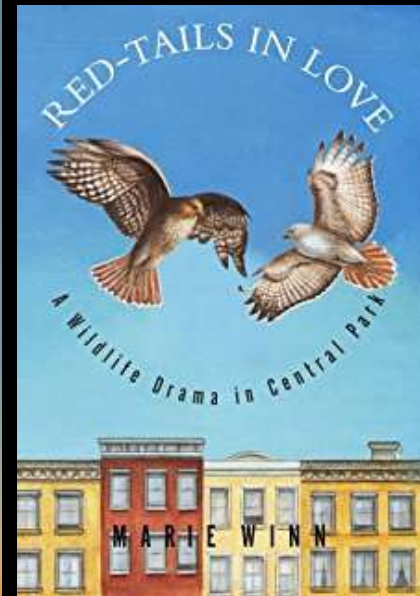
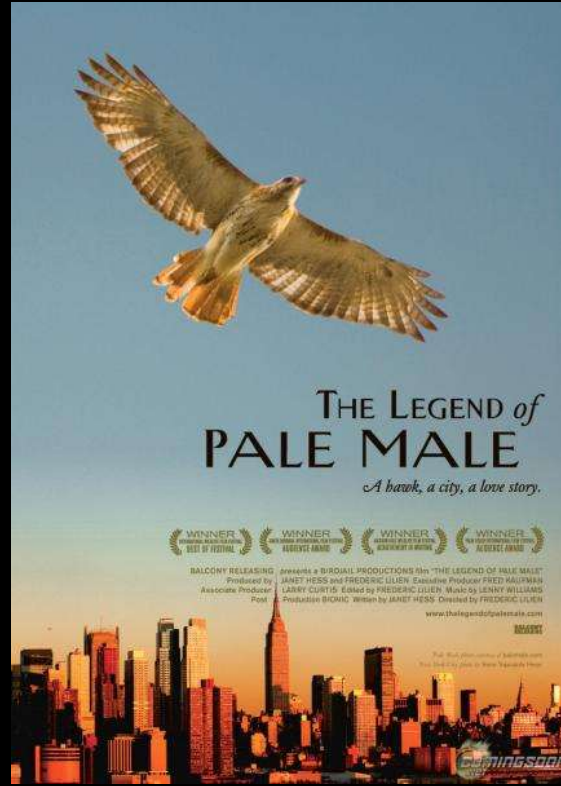
Urban wildlife is judged favorably when it in some way fulfills our expectations of wild nature or condemned as pestilent when it fails to follow the narrative for good fauna in the city – and stay in the proper places for nature in the city.

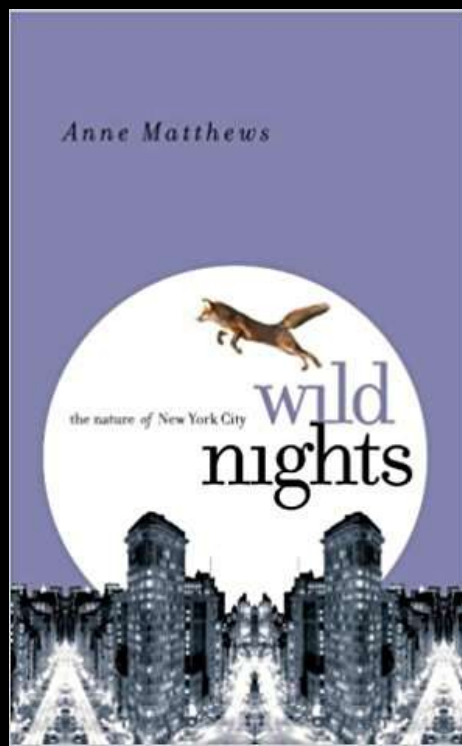
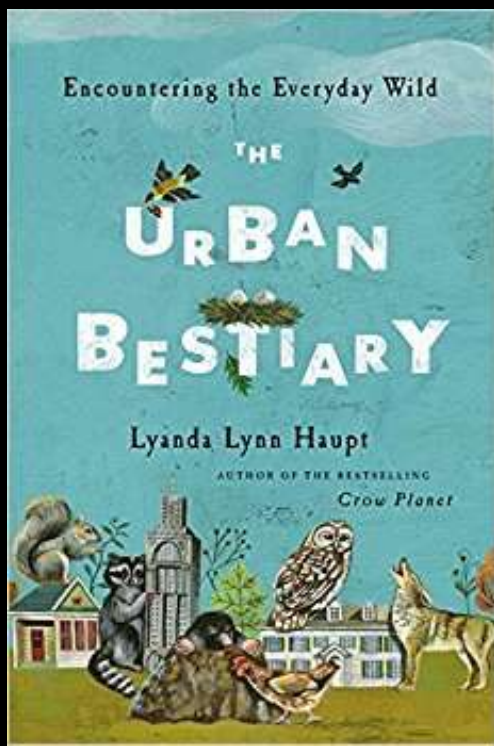
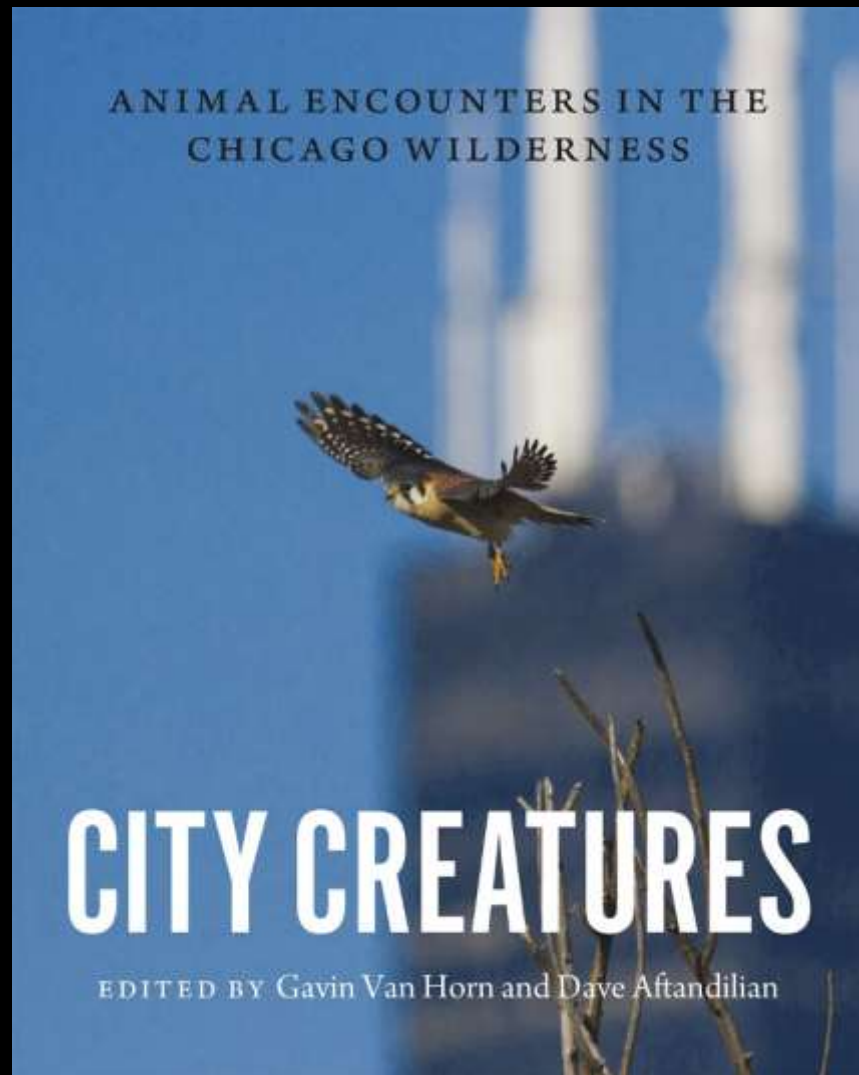
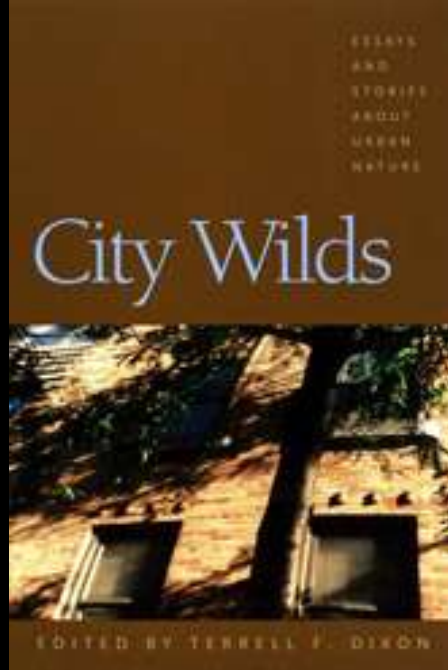
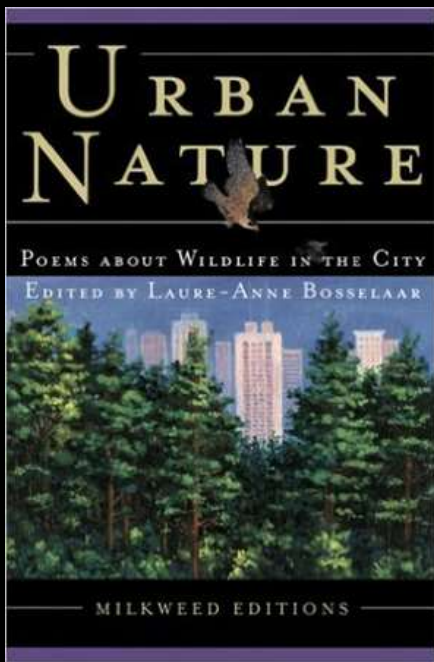


This narrative of urban wildlife declares that transgressive coyotes, rats, grackles, and pigeons are urban pests that further degrade the city...



...but nesting red-tailed hawks and peregrine falcons are redemptive wild additions to the urban scene.





Urban Wildness



© 2010 Hakoby Releasing



Down Here Below

Pale Male the famous red-tailed hawk
Performs wing stands high above midtown Manhattan
Circles around for one last pass over the park
Got his eye on a fat squirrel down there and a couple of pigeons
They got no place to run they got no place to hide
But Pale Male he's cool, see 'cause his breakfast ain't goin' nowhere
So he does a loop the loop for the tourists and the six o'clock news

Got him a penthouse view from the tip-top of the food chain, boys
He looks up and down on fifth avenue and says "God I love this town"
But life goes on down here below
And all us mortals struggle so
We laugh and cry
And live and die
That's how it goes
For all we know
Down here below

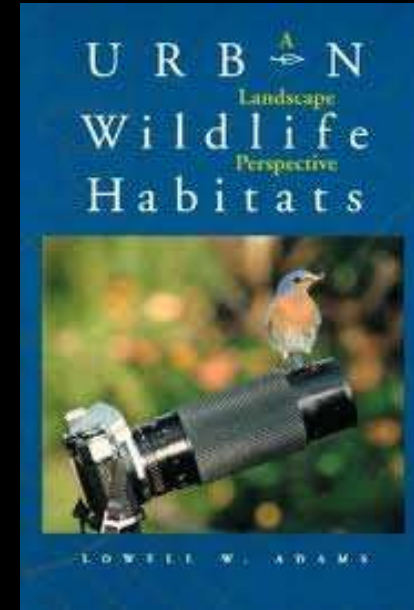
Steve Earle
Washington Square Serenade 2007



washington square serenade

Proper Place for Urban Wildlife?

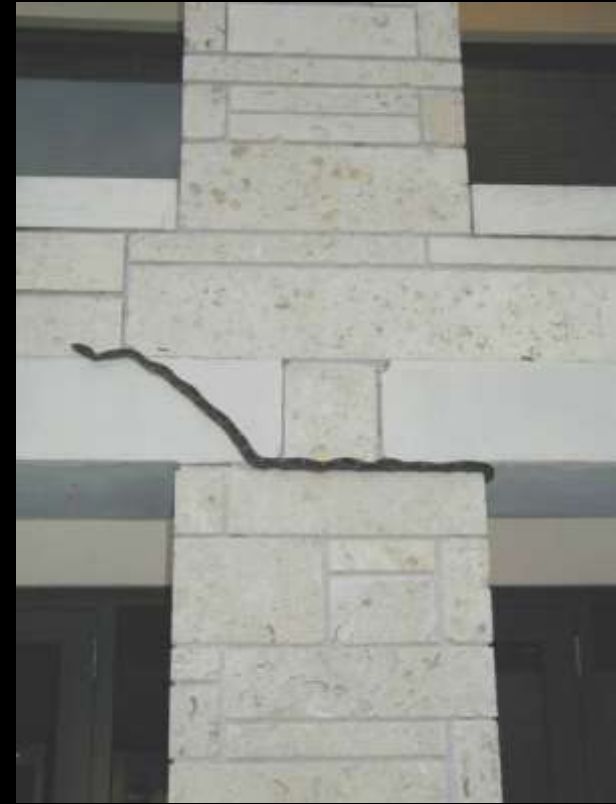
All of the city is habitat



The mobility of urban wildlife allows them to exploit the entire city as habitat.

Urban Wildness and the Agency of Nature

Non-humans do unexpected things and defy our expectations of how non-humans should behave and where they should live (their proper place)...their habitat.



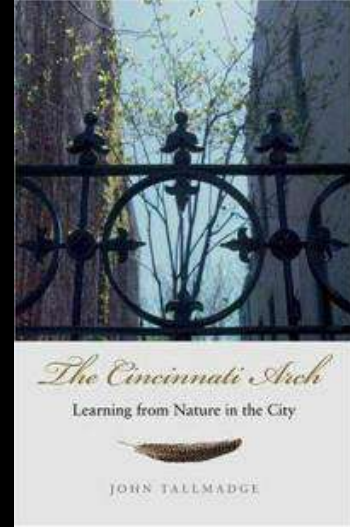
The Nature Writer's Problem

"Established Notions of Nature" and Urban Nature

The fact is that urban landscapes are just too mixed up, chaotic, and confused to fit our established notions of beauty and value in nature.

Maybe it's not really nature at all, not a real ecosystem, just a bunch of weeds and exotics mixed up with human junk.

John Tallmadge *The Cincinnati Arch: Learning from Nature in the City* (2004)





“The fact is that urban landscapes are just too mixed up, chaotic, and confused to fit our established notions of beauty and value in nature.”

By restricting our narrative of nature to the traditional concepts of American Nature, we fail to come to terms with a new kind of nature that has emerged in the city.

“Wild” Urban Greenspace



This new nature flourishes through its own agency in neglected urban wastelands and margins like vacant lots, garbage dumps, sewage ponds, unmaintained roadway and railway verges, old industrial tracts, abandoned buildings, overgrown urban creeks, crumbling walls, and other urban waste spaces.



“Wild” Urban Greenspace

Wastelands - whole patches

- Vacant lots
- Dumpsites
- Industrial Wasteland
 - Brownfields
 - Greenfields
 - Quarries and Gravel Pits
- Urban Infrastructure Land
 - Power plants
 - Water treatment plants
 - Reservoirs
 - Wastewater treatment plants
 - Sewage ponds
 - Constructed wetlands
 - Stormwater retention structures
- Unusable Land - bits and pieces
 - Slopes, gullies, corners, fragments

Margins – edges and ledges

- Urban waterways
- Canals, drainage channels
- Utility corridors
- Waysides
 - road waysides
 - railway verges
- Alleys – paved, unpaved, grass
- Walkways and pathways
- Fence lines
- Walls and ledges
- Pillars and bridge abutments

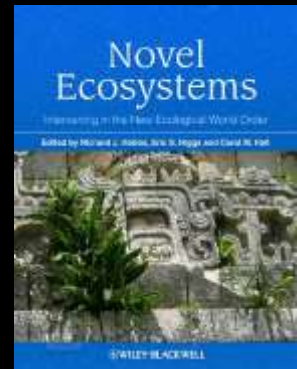
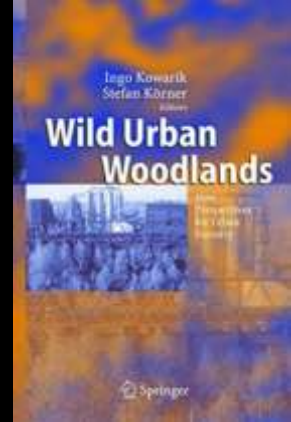
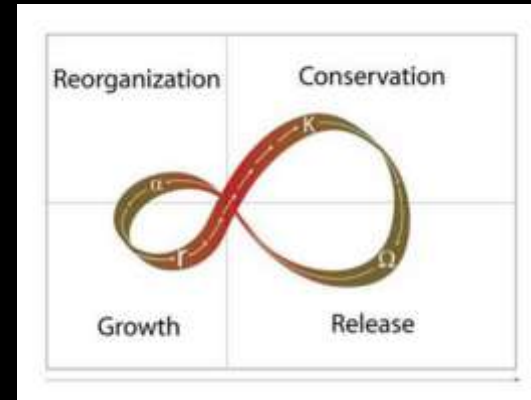


Wildness, Ecology, and the Agency of Nature

The natural capacity for *process* is the central point, not a particular, retrospectively determined and often idealized, *picture* of nature.



2017



2005



2007



2009



2012

What emerges in these unplanned urban habitats is a novel ecosystem both weedy and wild - the unintended product of human neglect and Nature's unflinching opportunism.

This urban coproduction of humans and nonhumans, I call Marginal Nature.

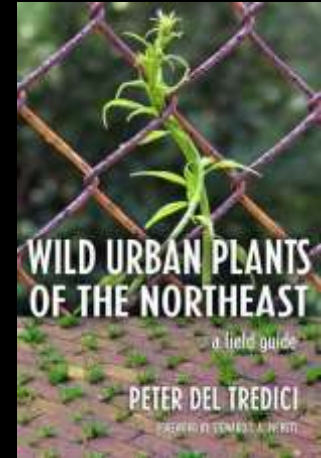


Marginal nature is neither pristine nor pastoral, but rather it is a new kind of nature whose ecological and cultural meaning is an open question.

Agency of Nature – Artistic Perceptions of Wild Urban Flora

Beautiful flower in your garden
But the most beautiful by far
Is the one growing wild in the garbage dump
Even here, even here, we are

Song by Paul Westerberg, "Even Here We Are" (14 Songs, 1993)



"I like it when a flower or a little tuft of grass grows through a crack in the concrete.
It's so ... heroic."

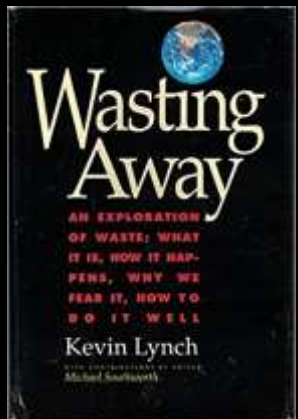
George Carlin



Ruinous Attractions – Waste Places in Urban Design and Planning

Many waste places have these ruinous attractions: release from control, free play for action and fantasy, rich and varied sensations. Thus children are attracted to vacant lots, scrub woods, back alleys, and unused hillsides...those screened, marginal, uncontrolled places where people can indulge in behavior that is proscribed and yet not harmful to others – are regularly threatened by clean-ups and yet are a necessity for supple society.

- Kevin Lynch *Wasting Away* (1990)



Putting Vacant Lots into Perspective



The City of Pittsburgh has no easy way of categorizing its vacant land. In fact, there is no one unifying definition used throughout the city. In some databases, vacant land means any land without a structure. Other databases classify it as any structure or parcel with no residents. There is no database that easily defines vacant land (no structure) that is un-maintained and not part of a right of way or park. Most of this variety of vacant land, (estimated between 6,000 and 12,000 lots), is symptomatic of communities with high levels of disinvestment, absentee landlords, and underserved low income residents. Vacant land can also be a cause, however, of many negative characteristics associated with urban blight. Thus, un-maintained spaces in the midst of urban communities create a vicious circle that many communities do not have resources to address.

Negative Influences, Positive Opportunities

A growing body of statistical research revolving around vacant lot issues in urban areas point toward direct, empirical correlations between vacancy and a variety of negative economic, environmental, and social influences. Thankfully, there is a flip side - equally strong evidence that reversing vacancy leads to stronger, healthier neighborhoods.

Negative Influences of Vacant Lots

The impact of vacant lots reaches beyond visual blight and decay, negatively affecting communities across economic, environmental, and social bounds.

Economic Influences

A study of vacant lots in Philadelphia estimated that the city and closely related public agencies spent \$1.8 million annually on cleaning vacant lots.

Neighborhood blocks with higher concentration of unmanaged vacant lots decreased property values by close to 18% (Wachter, The Wharton School)

Environmental Influences

Vacant Lots are targets for litter, illegal dumping, and criminal activity.

Security Influences

The City of Richmond, Virginia found that of all the economic and demographic variables tested, vacant properties had the highest correlation to the incidence of crime. (The National Vacant Properties Campaign)

Positive Influences through Greening Strategies

Strategies that address vacant land through green means are proven to have positive effects on communities in economically feasible ways.

Economic Influences

Cleaning and greening of vacant lots can increase adjacent property values by as much as 30% (Wachter, The Wharton School)

Planting a tree within 50 feet of a house can increase its value by about 9% (Wachter, The Wharton School)

Location of a house within ¼ mile from a park increased property values by 10% (Wachter, The Wharton School)

Vacant properties located near newly constructed parks were the first to sell during a revitalization project in North Philadelphia. (Philadelphia Green - Urban Impact)

Health & Recreation Influences

When people have access to parks, they exercise more. Access to places for physical activity leads to a 25.6% increase in the percentage of people exercising on three or more days a week (Trust for Public Land)

The Paradox of Meddling with Marginal Nature

- However well intended, interventions by humans may result in the undoing of marginal nature in vacant land.
- These habitats are accidental from our perspective, but they are deliberate expressions by the flora and fauna of marginal nature. As we impose our expectations of nature on marginal nature, we decide which organisms are allowed to remain.
- The urban planning ideas of filling vacant land with development or greening it with parks and gardens displaces marginal nature.
- In this contest between human and nonhuman intentions, these particular nonhumans lose.

or as Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it,

O if we but knew what we do
 When we delve or hew –
Hack and rack the growing green!...
Where we, even where we mean
 To mend her we end her,
When we hew or delve:
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.

- from the poem *Binsey Poplars*.



The High Line in New York City



Time Landscape 1978

Landscape artist Alan Sonfist created Time Landscape as a living monument to the forest that once blanketed Manhattan Island.

After extensive research on New York's botany, geology, and history Sonfist and local community members used a palette of native trees, shrubs, wild grasses, flowers, plants, rocks, and earth to plant the 25' x 40' rectangular plot at the northeast corner of La Guardia Place and West Houston Street in 1978.

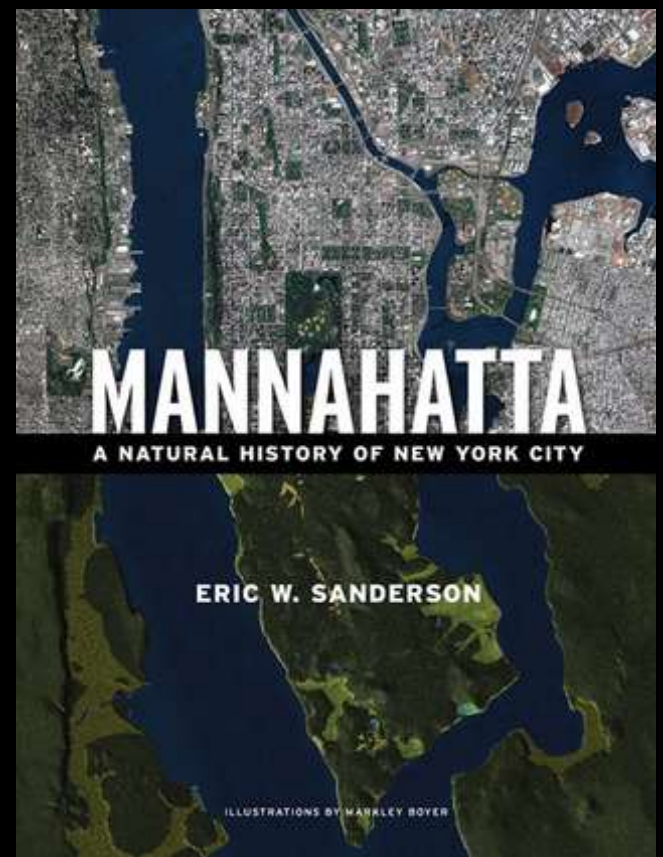
The intention was that this living artwork would be a slowly developing forest that represents the Manhattan landscape inhabited by Native Americans and encountered by Dutch settlers in the early 17th century.





“Rather than carving the land into something where the human hand wields a godlike force, he was interested in peeling back the centuries in a city, to remind us of the lost places that were once beneath.”





Retrospective Ecology, Historical Naturalness, and Urban Ecology

“The Mannahatta Project began in 1999, when landscape ecologist Dr. Eric Sanderson moved to New York City to work for the Wildlife Conservation Society. Dr. Sanderson realized that, to fully appreciate the concrete landscape of streets and buildings that was his new home, he would have to “go back in time” to recreate the its ecology from the “ground up.””

“Going back to 1609 allows us to see what New York City was before it was a city and to reimagine the city’s development in a way that would incorporate more of the natural cycles and processes (such as the hydrological cycle) that made the island the ecological gem that it was.”

Cleanup time for Time Landscape Indigenous Garden 2007

Of course, one person's pre-Colonial woodland is another's weed garden. One criticism leveled at Time Landscape is that many non-indigenous plants have taken root there.

"On a sunny Tuesday morning in mid-September, a group of volunteers gathered to weed and clean a fenced-in plot of land on the corner of LaGuardia Pl. and W. Houston St. "This effort will show that the community has an interest in reclaiming this land for public use," said Sara Jones, chairperson of the LaGuardia Place Corner Community Garden."

"Time Landscape is a piece of '80s art," said Sean Sweeney, director of the Soho Alliance, within earshot of the artist, Alan Sonfist. "The time has come for something new," Sweeney declared.

"This is an open lab, not an enclosed landscape," Sonfist told The Villager in 2007. "The intention was never to keep out all nonnative species, but rather to see how they come into the space with time."

The Villager, Volume 77, Number 17 | Sept. 26 - Oct. 2, 2007





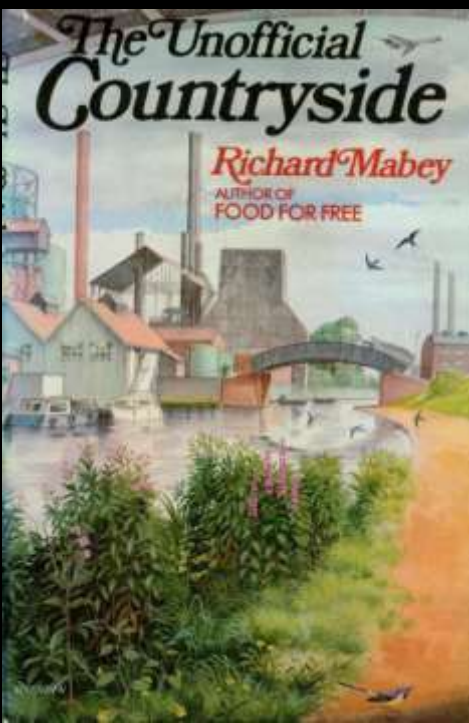
Literature and Meaning

Coming to Terms with Urban Nature

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

- T.S. Eliot, The Wasteland





The Country in the City
Find our bearings in a landscape

Richard Mabey *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973)

“I have called it the unofficial countryside because none of these places is in the countryside proper, nor were they ever intended to provide bed and board for wildlife.

Yet I think all these places do have one quality in common, and that is that, in them, the labels ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ by which we normally find our bearings in a landscape, just do not apply.

It is not the parks but the railway sidings that are thick with wild flowers.”



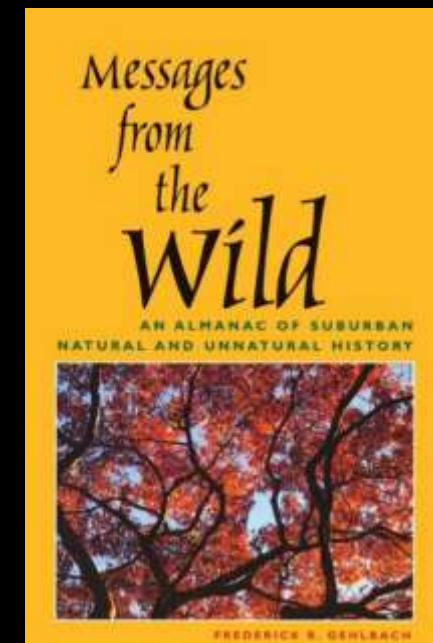
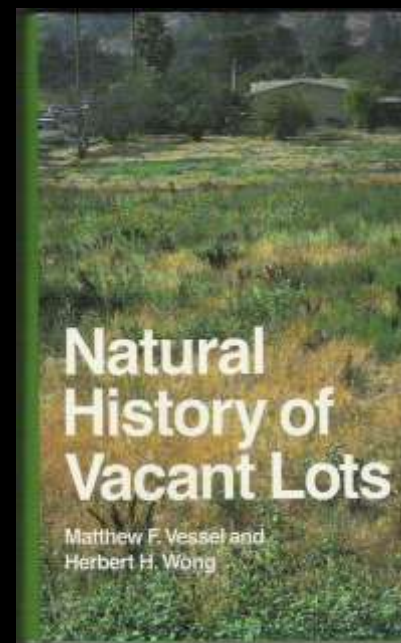
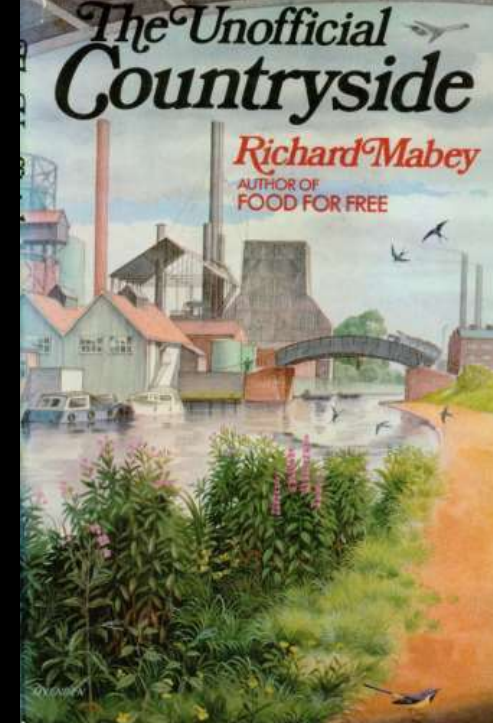
Urban Nature, Natural History, and Biological Slumming

“The medium is an account of a year in the unofficial countryside, based chiefly around my personal observations and experiences.

...the danger in this approach is being tempted into some biological slumming. The habitats I’ve described in this book are in no way a substitute for the official countryside. Nor are they something to be cherished in their own right, necessarily.

The last thing I want to do is to excuse the dereliction, the shoddiness and the sheer wastefulness of much of our urban landscape.”

“It is amazing how romantic these pockets of ragamuffin greenery can begin to seem, nestling, like Frances Burnett’s *Secret Garden*, behind the factory walls.”

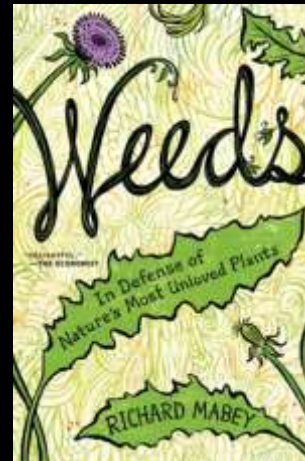


Romanticism and Gloom

“Our attitude towards nature is a strangely contradictory blend of romanticism and gloom. We imagine it to ‘belong’ in those watercolour landscapes where most of us would also like to live.”

“For it is nature’s fight back which is such an inspiration, her dogged and inventive survival in the face of all that we deal out. It is a survival story, and what it can mean for us, that is the subject of this book.”

“If the ability of wildlife to survive literally on our doorsteps is remarkable, its persistence in the face of this ceaseless change is amazing. It is also, I find, amazingly cheering. For it is a bleak view to see this story as nothing more than one of survival, with Nature irrevocably opposed to Man, forever just holding on. Looked at more hopefully it is a story of co-existence, of how it is possible for the natural world to live alongside man, even amongst his grimmest eyesores.”



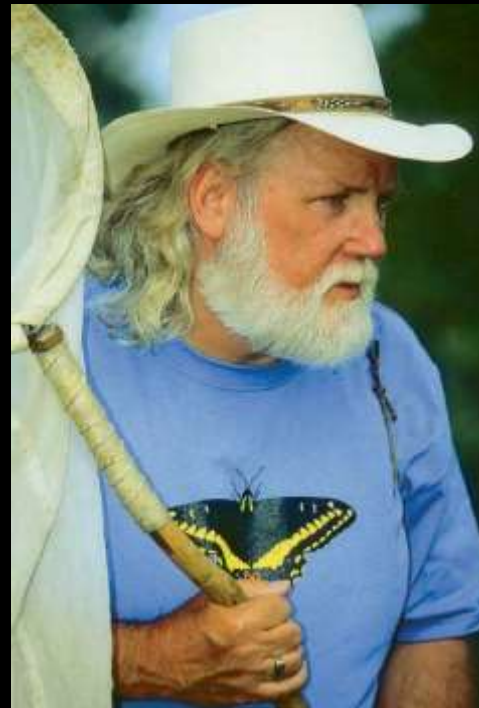
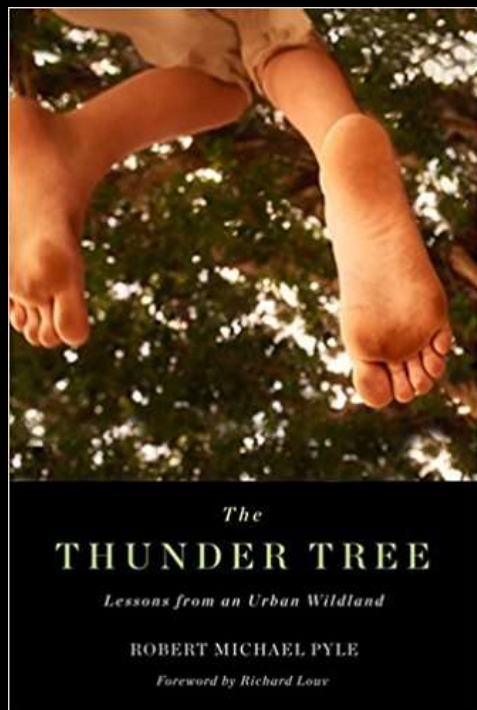
Accidental Wilds – Robert Michael Pyle

What do shreds and scraps of the natural scene mean, after all, in the shadow of the citified whole?

What can one patch of leftover land mean to one person's life, or to the lives of all who dwell in the postindustrial wasteland?

Robert Michael Pyle

The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland (1993)



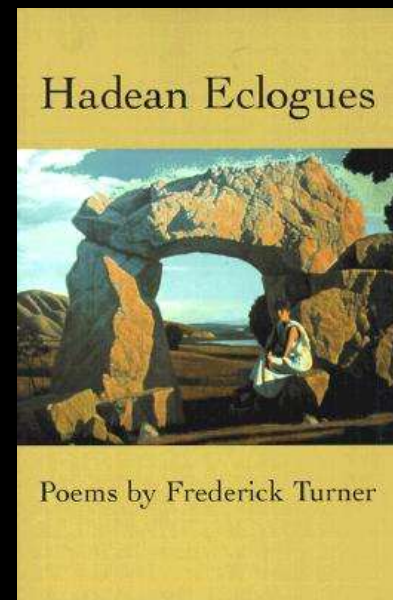
“More and more, we are discovering that the authentic wilderness of the mountains and deserts, though essential, is not enough to provide for a largely urban and overbloated population of humans. We need to keep some vacant lots, some big old hollow trees, some brush.

We need the Country in the City, the balm of the “accidental wild.”

Not Even Natural – A Neglected Product of Artifice

This is the landscape that nobody wants. It's my cup of rejection:
Driven to this unformed scraggly ignored backlot, this not-quite
Prairie, not-quite thicket, not even natural corner of
Texas, the hardscrabble left butt of a demoralized nation,
It is my choice and my pleasure to cherish this haphazard wilderness.
No, it's not even "wild" – it's a neglected product of artifice.
Come, let us walk by an improvised lakeshore, be given a vision:
Beaches of black dust, beautiful white ghosts, this drowned forest...

- Frederick Turner, first stanza "Texas Eclogue" in *Hadean Eclogues* (1999)



The Problem of Urban Nature Writing

Language and Urban Nature

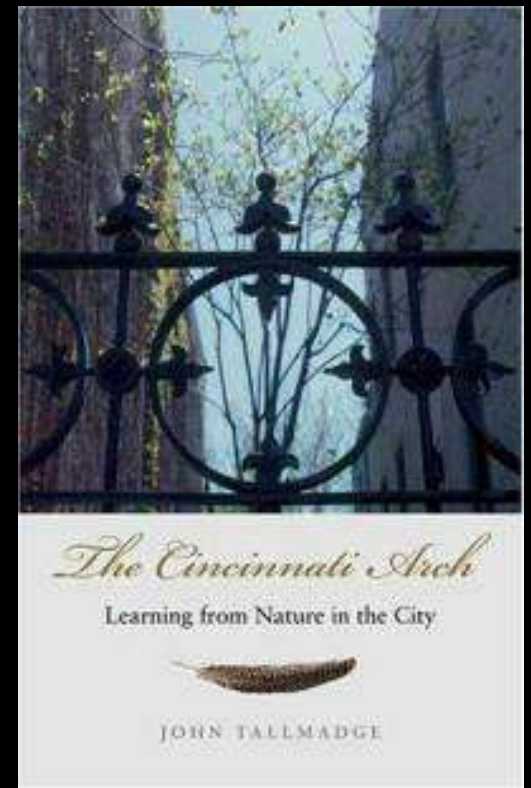
John Tallmadge *The Cincinnati Arch: Learning from Nature in the City* (2004)

Urban nature is not sublime...There's too much sterility in the form of roofs and pavement, and, oddly enough, there's also too much wildness, too many weeds and wooded borders and tangled banks, not to mention vacant lots going to brush.

Of course, "wilderness" won't do to describe such landscapes either. Despite the degree of wildness, there's too much human impact, too many alien species, too few large animals to meet the legal and cultural criteria.

The fact is that urban landscapes are just too mixed up, chaotic, and confused to fit our established notions of beauty and value in nature.

Maybe it's not really nature at all, not a real ecosystem, just a bunch of weeds and exotics mixed up with human junk.



AN INVENTORY: JOSEPH JONES AND *LIFE ON WALLER CREEK*

by Kevin M. Anderson

*There's an old codger down on Waller Creek,
rearranging rocks. What in the world is he trying to do?*

—Joseph Jones, 1982

The old codger stood midstream in Waller Creek on a hot August morning, a muddy plastic bucket packed with an assortment of tools on a rock at his side. His dark blue cap and rubber boots were also marked by creek mud. He was too focused on his work to notice me settle in the shade beneath the bridge. He was building a small dam of stones to redirect the meager current of the creek into a pool of water on a limestone ledge. This diversion would create a small waterfall once the pool filled. As I watched him so absorbed in his creek-work, I recognized a kindred spirit, another creek meddler given to rearranging rocks and flows, and I silently admired the fun he was having. The old codger voiced his approval as the water pooled and spilled over the limestone, and he smiled, first at the splashing water and then at me. It would be over ten years later that I read his book and realized I had met Professor Joseph Jones on that hot August day at Waller Creek. By then, Joe was dead, and I was left to get to know him through his daughters and his other extraordinary work, *Life on Waller Creek: A Palaver about History as Pure and Applied Education*.

*Forty years and more I have packed my lunch to
Waller Creek. Only since retirement, though, have I felt I*

*had time to spend undertaking small improvements along
its rugged banks: ephemeral gestures to be sure, but good
for body and spirit alike—an hour or so, three or four
days a week, before lunch. Instead of going up the wall I
go down to the Creek.*

—Joseph Jones

In this unassuming way, Joe begins his account of the life history of Waller Creek and his own long engagement with the creek. Professor Jones began teaching at the University of Texas in 1935, and each day he would walk down to the creek from his office in the English Department to eat his lunch and to put the stress of university life in perspective. Like Thoreau, whose writing Joe studied and loved, he kept a journal of his creek musings and observations. Waller Creek was Joe's Walden Pond, a place known intimately over a lifetime, and, like Thoreau, he argued for the value of preserving wildness, finding it even in a long settled place.

But, unlike Saint Henry and subsequent nature writers, Joe writes with a rare openness to the ruinous attractions of the urban detritus found in the creek. He clearly loves the creek as a site for nature encounter and for reflection, but he deliberately undermines the seriousness of the conventions of nature literature by including humans and our environmental impacts as more than just something to be lamented. The degrading artifacts of humankind that so



Kevin M. Anderson

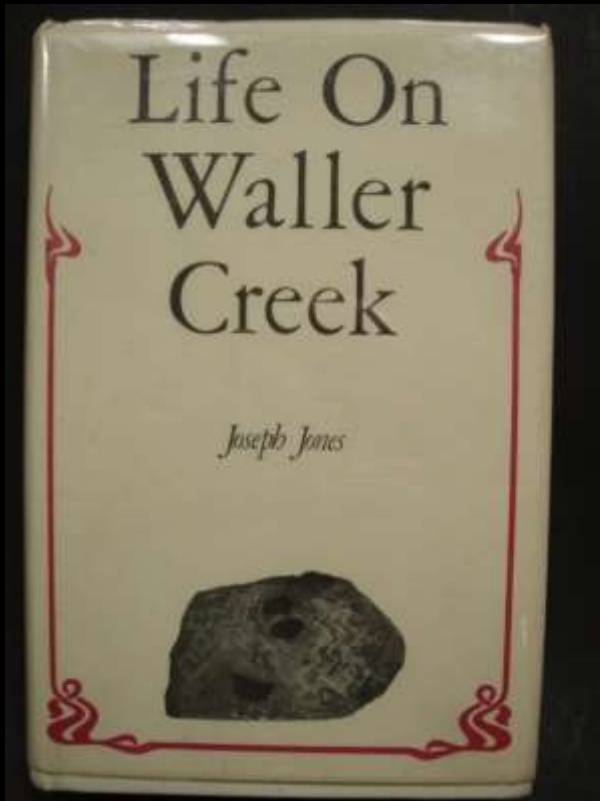
*(Left) Jones particularly loved
this section of Waller Creek
that flows under the 23rd
Street bridge on the UT
campus.*

There is an old codger down at Waller creek. What in the world is he trying to do?
Joseph Jones

He was a professor of English at UT from 1935 to 1975 and a specialist in American transcendentalism and the study of the literature and culture of Australia, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, Canada, and other countries in which literature in English was prominent.

Jones appeared in Richard Linklater's film, *Slacker*.

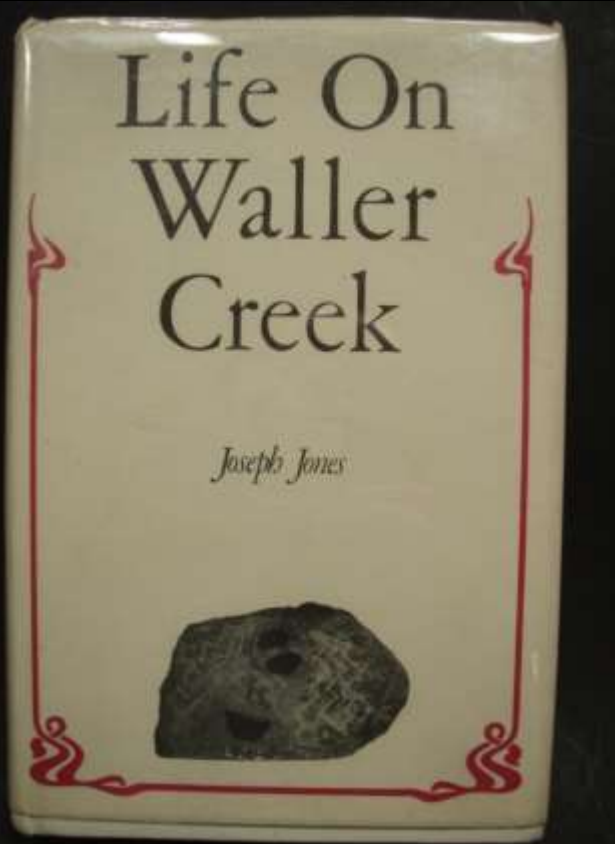
For ten years he wrote and revised an account of this work, his thinking, and his values in *Life on Waller Creek* published in 1982.



Life on Waller Creek - A Different Engagement with Urban Nature

At one level, this book is a standard natural and cultural history of a stream with its limestone bed speckled with fossils anchoring the geological timescale of the history and framing the timeline of biological occupancy.

Two aspects of this book set it apart from the previous texts.



Constructive Meddling – The Socioecological Creek

First, Jones does not just go to the creek in search of redemptive encounters with wild nature like Mabey, Pyle, or Tallmadge.

Jones goes with Waller Creek not as just a site for the observation of nature but as an encounter through constructive meddling.

“Forty years and more I have packed my lunch to Waller Creek. Only since retirement, though, have I felt I had time to spend undertaking small improvements along its rugged banks: ephemeral gestures to be sure, but good for body and spirit alike – an hour or so, three or four days a week, before lunch.

Instead of going up the wall I go down to the Creek.”

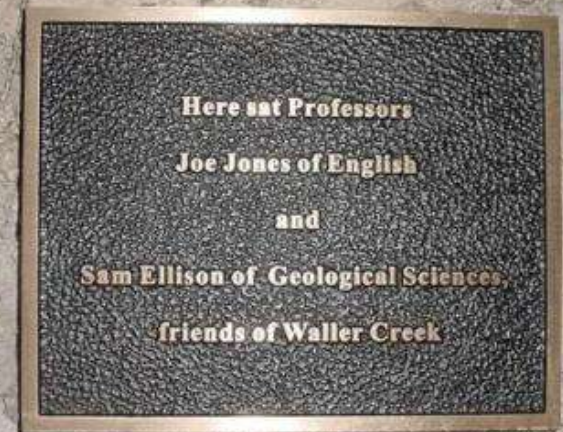
Walking the Forty Acres : Waller Creek Wilderness Trails and Adjuncts



By: S.P. Ellison, Jr., Joseph Jones, and Keith Young

Prepared for Members of the University of Texas at Austin Retired Faculty-Staff Association

May 10, 1983 / General Meeting of the Association



Inventories – The Socioecological Creek

The second aspect of this book which sets it apart is, perhaps, a more radical departure from the conventions of narratives of urban nature.

- In his journals, Jones kept a record of each day's visit to the creek with detailed observations of what he saw there and his thoughts about the creek.
- Where the conventional expectation is that these catalogues would be a naturalist's observations of nature, Jones was not a naturalist, but rather an engaged literate observer encountering a marginal urban place.
- He carefully records what he sees and experiences without censoring the detritus of the urban landscape in favor of redemptive moments of nature.
- He calls these lists of prosaic observations "Inventories," and they are interspersed throughout the text like phenomenological snapshots of the place.



Engagement with Unredeemed Nature Cretaceous Limestone Gutter

“I would hope also that the reader, if he should tire of being reminded overmuch of what an efficient trash-receiver (up to a point) the Creek has become in our day, will exercise the reader’s privilege of imagining what counterparts to an inventory of the 1970s-80s were almost certainly to be found in Waller Creek pretty steadily after 1839 and indeed even before.

But let him first accept himself as part of the continuum and become his own short-term archeologist: such fugitive creek-things as I will be cataloguing here, when carried and buried, might be thought of as archeology going somewhere to happen.”



Inventory

The name "Billy" neatly scratched with a stick through the algae onto the Creek bottom...

Roots projecting straight out from between strata at the base of a cliff, groping for water: what trunk do they feed, at what distance?...

A rusty bucket-bottom caught through one of its holes on a ragweed stub, two feet up...

Dandelions and some other yellow flowers are out on sunny days in early January...

I'm almost as glad to see readers on the Creek bank as I am to see longear sunfish in the pools...

A pink plastic spoon.



Inventory

A yellow candy-wrapper...

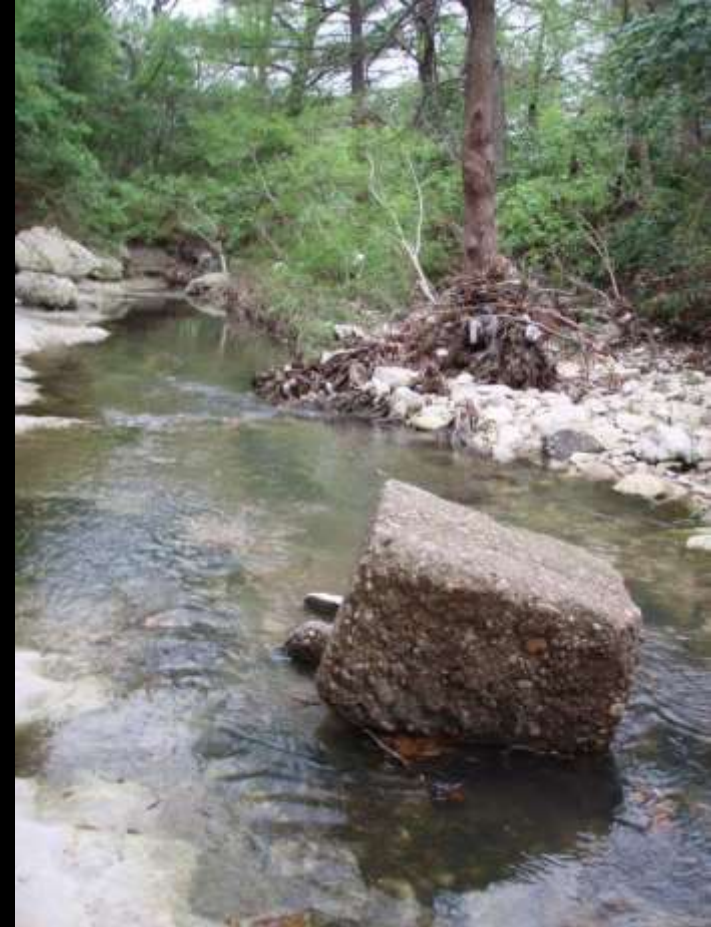
Plastic bottle for duplicator ink...

Half a cement block...

and from masses of radiant leaves the grackles, no longer wheezing out half-whistles...carol hymns of glory to God...

A largish sheet-metal cylinder, very rusty...

Cypress needles help traction, too, on a slippery bank.

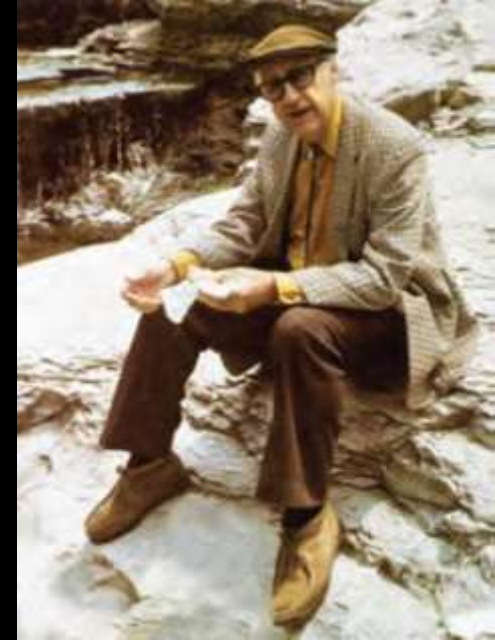


The Socioecological Creek

“The Creek is an ever-visible manifestation of continuity, of life... it is the sum total of many processes, an intricately integrated process in itself...

The fact that it has been interfered with by man, and continues to be interfered with, must be accepted as part of such total process, whatever opinion may be held as to the merits of the interferences.”

Joseph Jones





The Socioecological City

Urban Nature = A coproduction of humans and nonhumans